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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: U.S.-TAIWAN RELATIONS

¶1. Summary: Taiwan's major Chinese-language dailies focused news coverage August 25-27 on President Chen Shui-bian's trip to Central America; on the 2008 presidential election; on the investigation into the explosion of a China Airlines passenger jet in Okinawa last Monday; and on the future prospects of Taiwan's travel business. The centrist, KMT-leaning "China Times" ran a banner headline on page four August 26 that read "The United States Has Reportedly Instigated [Taiwan's Allies] to Oppose [Taiwan's] UN Bid; Bian Is in Central America to Secure [Allies'] Support."

¶2. In terms of editorials and commentaries, an editorial in the pro-independence "Liberty Times" said the fundamental reason behind the fact that Washington offered a dissatisfactory arrangement for President Chen Shui-bian's transit this time is because Taiwan has yet to become a normal country. The article thus urged Taiwan to become a new country via holding referenda, the name-change campaign and writing of a new constitution, so that it can enter the international community under the name "Taiwan" in a majestic manner. A "China Times" editorial, however, criticized President Chen for overspending Taiwan's diplomatic resources by taking advantage of the United States' goodwill towards Taiwan. An editorial in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" lamented that Chen has missed his chance to speak up his protest -- namely, Chen should have held an outdoor press conference rather than remaining in his plane when transiting Alaska. A separate "Taipei Times" op-ed called for high-level U.S.-Taiwan dialogue to clear up all miscommunications and misperceptions between the two sides. An editorial in the conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" said the "right reaction to President Chen's referendum plan is to ignore it" as it will come to nothing in the end. End summary.

A) "Only With [Holding] Referenda, Name Change, and Writing a New Constitution Can [Taiwan] Enter the International Organization in a Majestic Manner"

The pro-independence "Liberty Times" [circulation: 720,000] editorialized (8/25):

"President Chen Shui-bian set out for a visit to Taiwan's allies in Central and South America. While transiting Alaska for refueling, Chen remained in his plane and told the U.S. representative who received him that the transit arrangement this time was inconvenient, uncomfortable and undignified. Chen protested [the U.S. treatment] by not wearing his jacket and tie but a 'UN for Taiwan: Peace for All' sticker on his shirt. Such a dissatisfactory transit arrangement was obviously a consequence of [Chen's] push for the 'UN referendum,' and its fundamental reason was because Taiwan has yet to become a normal country. As a result, high-level interactions between Taiwan and the United States cannot proceed as normal diplomatic practices and thus must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, which would constantly be affected by chance occurrences. All these are unfair for Taiwan.

"During a recent interview with the BBC, however, Chen pointed out that Taiwan is already an independent country, and there is thus no need [for it] to make a further declaration. Even so, judging from the treatment Chen received when transiting Alaska, at least the United States does not acknowledge that Taiwan is already an independent country. Based on the 'Taiwan Relations Act,' the United States 'regards' Taiwan as a country simply for the sake of expedience. ...

"The issue concerning Taiwan's declaration of independence, as mentioned by the BBC host, happens to have pointed to the matter that China and the international community care about most -- namely, the matter of 'Taiwan' becoming 'the country of Taiwan.' Taiwan will become a new country if we discard the system of the Republic of China via holding referenda, the name-change campaign and the writing of a new constitution. Should that happen, regardless of whether other countries recognize Taiwan immediately, one instant effect will be that Beijing's one-China principle will no longer be able to fetter Taiwan. This is because the springboard of Beijing using its one-China principle to declare that Taiwan is part of China, namely, the ROC, has totally vanished. ..."

B) "[Chen's] Visit this Time Has Expedited [the Process of] Overspending [Taiwan's] Diplomatic Resources"

The centrist, KMT-leaning "China Times" [circulation: 400,000] (8/27):

"... [President Chen's] visit to El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua this time is no longer for enjoying gun-salute and red-carpet [treatment] but for an urgent need to cement Taiwan's foreign relations. From the very beginning, Chen's trip this time was shrouded by two sorts of shadow: First, Chen's insistence on pushing for a referendum on Taiwan's UN bid has done severe damage to Taiwan-U.S. relations and triggered the U.S.'s retaliation;

second, Costa Rica switched recognition to Beijing, and [Taiwan's] diplomatic tectonic plate in Central America is being eroded. The two kinds of shadow have both created unprecedented serious crises for Taiwan. But a close look at Chen's behavior indicated that he evidently shows no interest in mending Taiwan-U.S. relations, and for the island's allies in Central America, Chen simply wrote checks to secure their relations for the time being. ...

"Many times in the past, Chen had taken advantage of the United States' goodwill toward Taiwan and used his transits of America to build up his own momentum. Now Chen has offended the United States which, in return, decided to 'attack Chen by exploiting his weakness' and to punish him by downgrading the treatment for his transits. ... Chen himself claimed that he is 'enduring humiliation just to perform his duty,' but in reality, he is asking for humiliation himself; he was even trying to play the underdog to win sympathy, creating an image of him suffering humiliation for the entire island. Indeed, Taiwan-U.S. relations are no longer an issue that Chen finds it necessary to ponder. ...

C) "Chen Misses His Chance to Bat"

The pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" [circulation: 30,000] editorialized (8/25):

"President Chen Shui-bian's decision to stay on his aircraft during his stopover in Alaska in protest at his treatment by the US government is not without precedent. Former president Lee Teng-hui did the same in the mid-1990s to voice his objection to the limited itinerary that had been offered to him during a tour of the nation's allies in the region. Unfortunately, Chen's 'no feet on US soil' boycott did not have the impact he would have liked, and certainly was not as theatrical as Lee's effort. When the US State Department has the cards stacked against you, sometimes there can be more effective ways to milk a media event than sitting in a plane and sulking.

"Holding an outdoor press conference testing the limits of restrictions on Chen's speech would have been preferable -- and would have had the added advantage of a potentially spectacular icy mountain backdrop to remind viewers of just how much Chen and Taiwan have been left out in the cold, both diplomatically and

strategically. This would have been especially significant considering that Taiwan's enemies in the US government -- not to mention across the Taiwan Strait -- would have been delighted to see Chen stay cooped up in first class rather than walking freely into The Last Frontier. ..."

D) "High-level US-Taiwan Dialogue Is Necessary"

Liu Kuan-teh, a Taipei-based political commentator, opined in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" [circulation: 30,000] (8/27):

"As expected, the administration of US President George W. Bush took the opportunity to punish President Chen Shui-bian during his transit in the US en route to the nation's diplomatic allies in Central America. The reason for this, without any doubt, lies in Chen's insistence on pushing for a referendum on using the name "Taiwan" to apply for membership in the UN. ... Despite stressing its respect for Taiwan's democracy and people, there is a clear tendency from the Bush administration to separate them from Chen and his own political agenda. If this is the case, more punishment can be expected if Taipei and Washington fail to come up with a way to talk.

"Punishing Chen while not defying the US' commitment to Taiwanese democracy constitutes the main element of such a strategy. The US seems to be looking forward to dealing with the next Taiwanese president -- hopefully someone the US perceives as rational and cooperative. In his conversation with Brown, Chen suggested Bush send a special envoy from either the State Department or the Department of Defense to engage in face-to-face dialogue with him in Taipei. Such a scenario implies that the current channels of the AIT and Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Washington do not function well. It also suggests that the US bureaucracy that handles affairs with Taiwan might be providing insufficient or prejudiced opinions on the real situation in Taiwan. ...

"There is no doubt that most people in Washington think Chen is a 'trouble-maker.' They see Chen's push for Taiwanese independence -- through holding a referendum, introducing a new constitution and listing the so-called 'four wants and one without' -- as needless provocation of China. The US does not want to be dragged into cross-strait conflicts. From the US viewpoint, Chen seems to be taking the country's assistance for granted. Washington increasingly sees Chen as an irresponsible politician who cares only about elections and fails to appreciate the difficulty of the US position.

"The key miscommunications and misperceptions come largely from the timing and judgment of the rhetoric even if the underlying policies being adopted by the Chen administration are in line with its course toward democratic consolidation. Therefore, what's important now is to seek an opportunity for direct and high-level dialogue between Taipei and Washington. There is still room for both sides to straighten things out or to come up with a mutually acceptable solution. Political punishment on transit treatment is not helpful for future talks."

E) "Why Worry about U.N. Plan?"

The conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" [circulation: 30,000] editorialized (8/27):

"... Of course, President Chen knows that full well. He doesn't care whether Taiwan can join the United Nations. He cares about how his move can be translated into votes for candidates of his party in the January and March elections and, in particular, his party's victory's in the presidential race on which hinges his fate after next May 20. ... Beijing has a Taiwan phobia. Every action President Chen takes is interpreted as a move towards Taiwan independence or separatism. We must remind Chinese leaders that whatever he may do will come to naught anyway. So long as China has the veto power, Taiwan has no chance whatsoever to join the United Nations. The referendum? The Chinese should deem it a farce. They should sit back to enjoy it, knowing that all the time it would end to their amused satisfaction. ...

"Washington, on the other hand, has reason to be angry, because

President Chen has taken back his word. President George W. Bush shouldn't be too angry, though, for it's not the first time Chen has reneged. Remember how Chen maneuvered to have the National Unification Council 'cease to function' only early last year? Chen promised Bush not to scrap the said council, which was rendered defunct. And Bush can do little to whip Chen into line, now that the latter has less than ten months of his second and last term left. ... The right reaction to President Chen's referendum plan is to ignore it. Clear-thinking men and women in Taiwan regard it as a stupid referendum. It's an insult to their Homo sapiens intelligence to be asked to voice yes or no on the question of Taiwan's U.N. bid. Internationally, what Chen is doing should be interpreted as a petty megalomaniac at his wits' end taking his last sleepwalk."

YOUNG